

## CHAPTER 11

# Architecture, urbanism and neocolonial dependence\*

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The process of production of architectural, urban and other physical works is adjusted to the general form of the capitalist process of production, with its concrete characteristics within a social formation being determined by the particular form of insertion and relationship of the capitalist mode of production to the elements of other modes of production. The raw materials for this process of production are the so-called construction materials, from bricks and cement to electrical wiring and sanitary artefacts, lifts etc. The tools used range from the trowel and the spirit-level directly handled by the construction worker, to the cranes, bulldozers and giant concrete mixers that are directly linked to the large factories producing enormous prefabricated pieces or even entire housing units.

It should be pointed out, however, that in capitalist countries in general, and particularly in those countries that are subjected to the conditions of neo-colonial dependency, the régime of production of these objects lags behind that of social production in general insofar as it employs petty manufacturing or even precapitalist forms of production on a large scale. A similar situation exists in the production of constructional materials, where there are small artisanal workshops which act as “contractors” producing wooden pieces, metal frames, tiles and bricks, and where the various forms of over-exploitation of labour-power survive, such as payment by piecework, a working day of 12 to 16 hours, and child labour. All this survives no matter what labour legislation exists, alongside the large monopolies producing cement, concrete and prefabricated elements where the more developed forms of capitalist production are present.

This situation of backwardness also appears in the actual construction process itself where manufactured forms of production are employed—above

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all in the construction of individual houses. This involves more or less limited groups of workers operating within a rudimentary division of labour and working with manual tools—a process whose fundamental driving element continues to be human labour power, and which continues to rely on the individual skills of the direct worker. However, the growing tendency for the prefabrication not merely of the elements of an architectural work, but of the entire work itself, indicates the way in which the industrial labour form—which implies the progressive displacement of man by machine—is penetrating this sector.

In dependent neo-colonial countries the survival of these precapitalist forms in construction activities is explained by a double reason. On the one hand the limitation on the capacity to import machinery and equipment that is determined by the low availability of foreign exchange funds affects construction activities, as it does all activities in the productive sector. In these conditions, and given the absence of a local producer sector for machinery and equipment, the construction sector has to work with relatively rudimentary means of production. On the other hand, the absence of competition on the world market, given the lack of mobility of the goods produced, permits the massive utilization of unskilled labour power whose wage levels are maintained below those current in the remaining branches of industry. This labour power is not able to obtain employment in industry, where the demand for hands is restricted by structural factors already mentioned. It therefore sells itself at a price equal to or even below the minimum legal wage for short periods of time, under arbitrary contract conditions (where they exist), and at the margin of any possibility for union organization given its limited numbers and the limited duration of its contractual period.

All these facts permit the entrepreneur to overexploit the worker, and to obtain high profit margins that are increased by the process of permanent inflation. This is also the source of the attraction that construction exercises on capital that is not reinvested in the industrial sector.

It is not accidental that the Colombian State, amongst others, seeks a solution to the crisis that affects the accumulation and reproduction of capital through massive action in the entire construction sector (housing, road networks, means of collective consumption etc.). This much is revealed in the emphasis put on the construction sector as a key sector in the "Four Strategies" of the 1971–1974 Development Plan and the enormous sums of money invested in "urban renewal" projects. Equally as unaccidental is the rapid process of monopoly concentration of capital in this sector, and the recent appearance of large "savings and housing finance" corporations which unite finance capital, national and foreign bank capital, property capital, and the monopolies controlling urban landed property. Capital and the State in this way seek to reopen the process of accumulation through the expansion of the very sector in which the over-exploitation of the working class is the easiest to achieve (see Pradilla 1974, 27–42).

The relatively low level of development of the productive forces in the sector as well as the labour relations that are dominant in it, place the construction worker in an ambiguous situation in relation to workers in the industrial sector: dispossessed of his means of production and forced to sell his labour-power in conditions of over-exploitation, the productive régime into which he is inserted still requires his particular skills and insists that his labour-power becomes the fundamental motor of this process. As a kind of proletarian-artisan, he is even talked about in terms of a division of labour that has been copied from the old artisanal and manufacturing forms: masters and apprentices.

In those situations where the process has taken on the form of large scale industry, it is more obvious that the direct worker is a worker in the fullest meaning of the word. And it is equally as clear that in both cases it is he who is the producer of the surplus labour that is appropriated by others and in the existing conjuncture, it is on him that the "development" policies of neo-colonial capital depend.

### The role of the architect-designer in the construction sector

The most common form of activity of the architect-designer is that of controlling the productive process as the designer of the work to be realized, and hence as the moulder of the final form of the product, or as the direct supervisor of the work in progress, or as both. This common form assumes different particular forms in agreement with the relationship that is established between the architect-designer and the "client" or owner of money-capital and/or the means of production invested in the realization of the work.

1. When he lacks the means of production and simply acts as the technical agent in the design and direction of the process, whether it be for an individual owner, a capitalist owner, or the State. In this case he is an indirect productive worker independently of the fact that his remuneration takes the form of a wage or appears in the form of "professional fees".
2. When he owns the means of production and realizes and controls the constructive process for an individual owner, for a capitalist or for the State. In this case, which almost always assumes the form of a contract at a fixed price, the designer-builder not only directs the productive process, but also appropriates a part of the surplus value produced by the worker, leaving the remaining part to the owner of the money-capital invested in the process, and to the other fractions of capital who participate in its realization as a commodity. Obviously when he is the owner of money-capital he will appropriate the quantity of surplus value corresponding to that of the investor-capitalist in the distribution since



he is acting as a capitalist owner. His participation in the distribution of surplus value will increase if he is the landowner, if he commercializes the product etc., until the point arrives when he appropriates its totality, this being the case with the property and financial monopolies that have developed in recent years.

It is necessary to emphasize the fact that the level of development of the productive forces in the construction sector has a direct influence on the design itself insofar as the design tendencies that emphasize the poetry of formal creation are consistent with the precapitalist forms of production that survive within developed capitalism, but which have a far greater importance in dependent capitalism. The preferred fields of action of this type of design are in the construction of individual houses—i.e., “unique” use-values that are valorized by the “semi-artistic” labour of the workers, and in prestige works for monopoly capital or the State. Both of these are charged with a clear ideological-symbolic content that the designer simply reproduces. In these cases the spontaneous form and lack of rationality of the product, as well as the employment of expert direct workers, are a prior condition for the existence of the activities of the “creators” who are obliged to materialize their personal “genius” in brick and cement.

On the other hand, the rationalist tendencies of design clearly correspond to the régime of production of large-scale industry, in which the determination of costs, the calculation of investment, profits and above all assembly-belt production for a large market constitute themselves into demands that progressively restrict the creative “genius” of the designer. It has been a rather sad truth of history that the development of capitalism has assassinated our old and glorious master of design with his “artistic” dreams.

We have already spoken of the State as a “client” of the builder–designer. As a “client” the State acts in three particular ways:

1. As a capitalist by appropriating from the labour put in by the construction workers. This is the case in the construction of so-called “social interest” housing where the State assumes a multiple role as an industrial, commercial and finance capitalist as well as that of a rentier. In this way the State will use surplus-value in the form of profits or of interests, in order to hand it over to the builder to pay the bureaucracy for its services or to “capitalize” it, all this being the fruit of the exploitation of the worker. It acts in a similar way when it realizes investments in public services which are sold to their users in the form of “convenient monthly quotas” that simultaneously include the profits and interests on the capital invested and the rents on the land occupied. Talk of making public services “profitable” is far from accidental.
2. As a general administrator of society to the benefit of capitalist interests. By investing the funds derived from taxing all social agents (the State budget) in public services and infrastructure that are “necessary for

economic development”, the State will realize a regressive distribution of income. This is to say that it will collaborate in the process of capitalist accumulation because the works which constitute “the general conditions of production and circulation”, such as roads, water-systems, sources of electrical energy etc., will not be undertaken by individual capitalists because of their low rate of profitability, even though they are indispensable for the process of reproduction of capital. Whilst for capital they constitute the means of realization and reproduction, for the wage-earner they represent a greater reduction in his wage.

3. As an instrument for the reproduction of the social relations of production (and in particular property relations) and the relations of class domination when the responsibilities of the State include such works as schools, official buildings, barracks etc. In this case architectural and urban physical works take on an inseparable dual character: on the one hand they become the material supports of the repressive or ideological apparatuses through which the State dominates society in the name of capital and reproduces its ideology; and on the other hand they provide the material supports of the means of life necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of the labour-power of the working-class, employees, and even the bourgeoisie itself (e.g. education, health, culture etc.). The State does not deduct the cost of these works from the profits of the capitalists (indeed they contribute to an increase in these profits) but rather from the wages of the workers, in this way making them pay for the means that assure their own slavery.

The designer, in carrying out his technical practice is thus an instrument in the service of the relations of production ruling in society. His practice is compromised by capital both in economic terms where it serves as an instrument in the exploitation of wage labour that is employed in construction, and in ideological terms where it acts as an often very efficient means for the reproduction of bourgeois ideology. Such ideology is contained not only in the function of the work, but also in the very form that the designer gives it in order to satisfy his client and the eternal glory of his personal genius.

Having exposed the nature of the process of production of object-works and the role of the agents who participate in it, we can now ask the question: Why are these objects produced? For what purposes are they produced? We shall insist on emphasizing that they are obviously produced to satisfy the needs of individuals or society, whether these needs grow out of a man’s stomach, or out of his own imagination or fantasy. It has always been this way from those historical periods when each individual made his own clothes, utensils and tools up to the present day when the production of objects is undertaken through a complex division of labour. However there is a difference: the objects produced today do not satisfy the personal needs of those that produce them, but rather the needs of others; i.e., they do not have a

use value for the producer, but only for others. They are produced for exchange, and they acquire the commodity form. As this form, objects then have the dual character of use-values and exchange-values.

Where are these objects exchanged—on the local, national or world market. However, they cannot be compared as useful objects in their natural form, since a vanilla ice-cream as a useful object has nothing to do with a piece of toilet soap, even if both are valued at the same sum of money. What makes it possible to compare two objects that are so dissimilar is their unique shared quality: the fact that they are products of human labour—not the concrete labour of the ice-cream or soap maker which is impossible to compare, but rather that of the general, comparable abstract labour that is shared by all forms of human labour—the expenditure of muscles, nerves and brain.

The essential value of a commodity is this abstract labour—its magnitude, the quantity of abstract labour contained in it, and its measure of labour-time. What we are dealing with here is not the time that each skilled or unskilled worker uses up, but rather the average time employed in society for its production: that is to say the *socially necessary time* to produce this commodity in a specific country and at a determined historical moment. In this way the capitalist market does not confront things, but rather producers through things: the exchange value of objects triumphs over their use value and all the objects produced are produced for exchange—they are commodities.

Architectural or urban objects do not escape this general law of capitalism: they are produced for exchange and he who does not dispose of money—the produce of the sale of the commodities that he produces or of the sale of that particular commodity that is labour-power—is not able to buy them on the market. As the bourgeois economists put it: if there is not *solvent demand* there is not the production of houses or anything.

This law is equally as valid for housing as it is for the services that the State produces. Proof of this lies in the fact that whilst thousands of houses remain empty for long periods of time, thousands of poor families lack houses and minimum services and live overcrowded in inner-city tenements and slums. If capitalist production had as its object the satisfaction of individual and social needs, logic would demand that it must produce housing and services for all those families that need them. The capitalist produces houses only if there exist buyers who are capable of paying the price that *he* fixes for his product, and which logically includes his profit.<sup>1</sup>† This is the ultimate reason for the “housing problem” which though it affects all social classes, affects the working-class and the unemployed most of all, making it impossible for them to accede to the supply of housing offered. In this way the myth of the “social” function of the private construction of urban, architectural and housing objects is exploded. However, we should make it clear that we are not dealing

with the particular “ill-will” of housing constructors but rather with the *general law of the capitalist production of commodities*. For a capitalist it matters not whether the commodities whose production guarantees the reproduction of his capital and the increase in his profits takes the form of housing, basic foodstuffs, perfumes, pornographic articles, napalm bombs and weapons, or pious engravings. To forget this is to forget the reality of capitalism and to live in the fallacious world of bourgeois ideology.

Is it valid to apply this law to self-building? Let us see. There are two types of self-building: that of the “shanty” miserably built to satisfy the vital need for shelter, without designers, with throwaway materials, and with a heavy investment of family labour, and that of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois housing built by an architect, with “first-class” materials and with the utilization of wage-labour. In the second case the commodity relationship is established in the construction process through the purchase of the commodities used in it (including labour power). In both cases, however, the fact that they are products of human labour and are inserted into dominantly commodity relations means that both the “shanty” and the luxury mansion can be converted into commodities, independently of the fact that they may have been produced for the use of the owner and not directly for exchange.

The designer then participates as a technical agent or capitalist owner in the production of commodity objects and not simply in the production of useful objects or “art-objects”. His direct determination by the system of relations of production/productive forces, and by the class structure can be identified in two areas: on the one hand by the conditions ruling in the production of objects, and on the other by the form in which the owner of capital seeks to introduce his products on the market for a determined social class. This conditioning is not only present in terms of the function that this object must fulfil, but also in its form and dimension. In this way the myth of the “free and neutral designer” is exploded.

We can now see why the formal and dimensional reply given by the designers of housing ranges from the burrows that the State constructs in its “self-built units for the least favoured classes”, to the gilded palaces of our bourgeois neighbourhoods. The consumption capacity of an individual for architectural objects depends in part on the social production that he succeeds in appropriating for himself, and this part is determined by his relation of ownership or non-ownership to the means of production i.e., it is given in terms of social class, though it is achieved through the mediation of the “distribution of income”.

The designer works at the heart of the class division of society, and if we are to be honest, at the side of his bosses, the capitalists. He carries out the same mission when his technical practice is put into service in the construction of the locations for the ideological or repressive apparatuses of the bourgeoisie State. Finally, it can be said that the urban designer acts in the same manner when, despite his good intentions, he becomes an instrument in the general

†Superscript numbers refer to Notes at end of chapter.

programming of the urban segregation of the classes and the strategy of the maintenance of that "urban disorder" which is nothing more than the sacred and inviolable order of private free enterprise. This urban disorder then is an expression of the liberty of capital—a reflection in space of the anarchy reigning in the capitalist market—that the bourgeoisie defends with blood and fire as the highest achievement of "individual dignity".

This liberty obviously has two faces: the liberty of the capitalist to exploit the dispossessed, and the liberty of the dispossessed to be exploited, to develop their own misery and to die of hunger where they want. These rights of the exploited, however, encounter one limitation—they are to be exercised only where they do not offend the sight or the smell of the bourgeoisie and the petite bourgeoisie in its service. The urban designer respects and improves on the fine spatial delimitation for the exercise of these rights, by zoning our cities and by defining through the use of indices and codes the spaces where the liberty of the one or the other can be developed.

The urban designer is also working for capital when he designs "urban renewal" zones and road plans, because in this function he is programming: the uprooting of the exploited classes that live in these areas; the recuperation of the land by speculative landed and property capital; and the mechanisms through which this capital appropriates the ground rents generated by the new investment in roads and services.

To conclude we shall reply to a question that rises out of this discussion: what social class does the designer belong to? Using a definition of social class as the "effect" of the totality of the structures of the mode of production, or social formation, on the social agents that support it (an organization that is determined in the last instance by the relations of production and economic structure—see Poulantzas 1972, 75 and 98), we can thus affirm that:

Those who own the means of production and/or invest money capital in the production of objects of design, exploiting the paid labour force (or who employ other designers and assistants as wage earners in the production of the same design), belong to the bourgeoisie proper or the petite bourgeoisie.

The designers who sell their labour power to the State, to property capital or to other designers, in exchange for a wage, are located in the highest social stratum of the wage-earners. However a series of factors conspires to place them objectively in a social category in the service of capital—the technocracy. These include: the fact that they act as technical agents and docile instruments of capital in the exploitation of building workers; the profound domination exercised by bourgeois ideology on the general components of "design ideology", and its consequent reproduction in design practice and teaching; and, the political support that these designers generally give to the bourgeoisie and its State.

In short, irrespective of the intentions and consciousness of the designer, design as a technical practice is in the service of capital in its activity of exploiting wage-labour and dominating society in general.

### "Vulgar" urban and architectural ideology: an instrument of class domination

The world of commodities has rapidly been integrating all urban and architectural objects; including the natural elements considered suitable by speculative capital for increasing the advantages of its specific commodity. From the "natural" relation that is established between the designer and capitalist producers in construction activities, and at the heart of this fabulous world of consumer objects, there has arisen an urban and architectural ideology skillfully manipulated by the sellers of housing that both serves to create new consumer needs and to continue to reproduce the general ideological values of bourgeois society. In this way individuals are enslaved in a certain form of consumption and are convinced on a day-to-day basis that their "liberty and happiness" depend on the perpetuation of the economic and political domination of the bourgeoisie. As a simple, particular region of bourgeois ideology, this architectural and urban ideology, injected daily in small doses through the radio, cinema, television and the press, supports and transmits the social relations that characterize bourgeois society: private property, family, individual privacy, social differentiation etc.

A simple collation from the advertisements in three Colombian newspapers that were picked at random from a large pile is significant in helping us to see how these values are transmitted and reproduced.<sup>2</sup> Thus we read in a three-quarter page advertisement: "In Modelia, Fernando Mazuera and Co. Ltd., has seven responses to your demands for *your own house*: in styles, in prices, and in tastes. Fernando Mazuera has seven responses to your demands; one and two storey houses from 290,000 to 370,000 pesos, different facades, different distribution yet the same quality: a fabulous location and a magnificent day and night transport service, a neighbourhood without equal of more than 3000 families like *your own*, with all the services of a "modern city" . . . A few days later we read "we are not selling an apartment, *we are selling a different life* . . . Torre Panorama" . . . and, "in the exclusive Carrera 10° 97-27, alongside a beautiful park, . . . the house you have always dreamed about". We have here then, the "dream world" that is the result of the marriage of design, speculative capital and publicity: the private ownership of the house—the "divine gift" that guarantees security—at least while the monthly quotas are being paid and with them the profits, the rents and interests of the capitalist: the family—a particular family whose unity is structured around patrimony and inheritance; the differentiation of each family according to its tastes but amongst "families that are the same as yours", i.e., of the same social class; "a different life" that is to be achieved



through monthly repayments and the gift of two or three electrical household appliances that will fill housewives with joy. We have here the same "dream world" that promotes "Marlboro" cigarettes, the "popular car", the beauty queens, transistor radios and this or that political message—all draped with naked women; commodities to be used in the same way as a French perfume. This opium of the desires is aimed at the exploited classes who are submerged in unemployment, starvation, disease and overcrowding with the aim of producing the dream that makes them forget their exploitation.

The capitalist State is equally as bound by the same language. If, for example, the ICT (*Instituto de Crédito Territorial*, the Colombian Government's national public housing agency) changed its publicity message from "A house for every Colombian" to "A house for every Colombian family" (the absurdity of the former is obvious), then the content of this publicity remains the same: the private and individual ownership of property in housing. The maximum security that the State gives to Colombians thus consists of 20 years of monthly fret and worry over their repayments, and the permanent threat of eviction through incapacity to pay.

But the ideological message is not only transmitted through the publicity for housing, it also reaches us through the "qualities" of other architectural and urban objects: in the *beauty* of the parish church that pierces the sky with its tall steeple and makes us believe in the other life—in paradise—and reminds us that the prize of resignation to the poverty of this world is "that the poor will be kings in heaven"; the *solidity* of our barracks and jails that fills us with healthy patriotism making us feel safe as Colombians in our national honour as well as in our property, and makes us forget the repression that is exercised over the popular masses, and the unemployment and misery that are the origins of delinquency; the *majesty* of our skyscrapers that like phallic symbols cut the blue of the firmament and relate to us the successes of this aviation company, or that national or foreign beer, textile or petrol company—the "beauty" that is offered to the eager eyes of "all the people" though it is a product of the hunger of the workers and their families, whose strikes have been broken by labour legislation, the legal counter-pleas of the bosses, and the use of "available force". These are some examples of the ideology transmitted by architectural works that can only with difficulty be concealed by the "theories" of architectural design and form, and by discourse on "the aesthetic content of symbols" and "the contrast between the horizontality of volumes and the verticality of the elements of the facade".

The last example (at least in this essay if not in reality) of the use of vulgar urban ideology as an instrument of class domination arises out of the ruins of the inner city tenements and shacks destroyed by the bulldozer that announce the passage of a new avenue. "Urban Road Development" and "Urban Renewal" have as their goal the eviction, through reason or force, of the inner-city inhabitants from their central residential locations that allow them to survive through crime, street commerce, the sale of lottery tickets etc., and the

presentation of this process as works of development, modernization, and beautification. Beneath this phraseology is hidden the character of these projects as true weapons for the reconquest of the urban centre by monopoly capital and the State. Several months after the remains of their former houses have been swept away in the advance of the reconquest of the urban centre by capital, it is not uncommon to find the victims of this very process standing in delight in front of the iron and steel towers, and their windows stuffed with the luxury goods that they have never been able to consume. Often, as victims of their own lack of consciousness, they can be seen applauding the beneficiaries and promoters of this process of the private monopoly appropriation of an urban centre, that in fact was created by their own efforts (see Pradilla 1974, part IV).

The last residue of the neutrality of the artist-designer or technical planner dies here, in the extensive and complete field of vulgar architectural and urban ideology—part of bourgeois ideology in general. He has helped to create this ideology in his collaboration with capital and advertising, and he reproduces it on a daily basis in marble and bronze, aluminium and glass, asbestos and cement blocks, and over a more lengthy period, in his works or through his students in the university education system. All this is objectively marginal to the operation of individual will, since every technique and every technician is in the service of the dominant relations of production in the society in which he develops his particular practice.

## Notes

1. In Colombia, for example, the industry concerned with the construction of housing and architectural and urban objects has experienced an accelerated process of monopoly concentration which follows the general tendency of dependent neo-colonial capitalism, and which characterizes its market as oligopolistic. In these conditions the producers can freely fix the price of their products, relatively marginal to the play of supply and demand. The permanent presence of people producing houses under almost artisanal conditions with high costs of production, and the shortage of housing generated by the demographic growth of the cities, makes it possible for these monopolies to obtain super-profits by fixing their prices inside their costs of production. The ICT, the State agency that constructs "social interest housing", is nothing more than a State capitalist monopoly that controls the market of the highest stratum of the working class, and low-paid employees, which is not catered for by private industry.
2. *El Tiempo* (Bogotá): 21 May 1972, p. 7A; 17 June 1972, p. 12C; 8 Oct. 1972, p. 78. All italics are the author's own.

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